

# The Methodist Church



Eddie and Susan Sykes, Mission Partners, Bahamas, December 2007



## **CHRISTMAS/NEW YEAR NEWSLETTER - DECEMBER 2007**

Dear all,

At this festive time of year we send you our thoughts and prayers as we wish you all a very joyful Christmas and a Happy New Year. What follows is just a snippet of our lives as I share some of our experiences and insights of the past few months.

### **Tropical Storm Noel**

30<sup>th</sup> November is the 'official' end of the hurricane season. Thankfully we have experienced a second year without too much incident. The only named storm that passed this way was Tropical Storm Noel on 1<sup>st</sup> November. I was 'caught' while on the Island of Eleuthera, where I had to spend a few extra days because the very, very wet weather system progressed very slowly through the Bahamas. Flights to Nassau were suspended on the Tuesday, and didn't resume until the Saturday.

### **Eleuthera**

The reason for being in Eleuthera in the first place is that since 1<sup>st</sup> September I assist in being the minister of a congregation of some 35 persons in James Cistern, Eleuthera. I usually fly there on the early morning Sunday flight, conduct services in the morning and evening. On the Monday I take local school assemblies, visit those who are shut-in, and in the evening lead a Bible study. Then on Tuesday morning I head back to Nassau.

With time to go at this slower Family Island pace, I have had the opportunity to re-explore this beautiful, long and narrow island. There are places where you can see the deep blue Atlantic to the east and the aquamarines and turquoises of the Caribbean to the west, literally at the same time. The main road, 'the Queen's Highway', runs north-south along the length of the island and along the shore where the views are stunning, particularly if there is a sunset to be observed.

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**Pastoral Responsibilities**

I still have pastoral oversight of my two congregations in Nassau, plus this congregation in Eleuthera, which I travel to on a monthly basis. It does mean that continuity is a challenge in each church as each Sunday morning in Nassau I have at least two services, and occasionally three (7am, 9am, 11am). It works fine but I am pretty tired come 1pm. One of our senior ministers, Rev Dr Kenneth Huggins, who was the Superintendent in Andros, retired as of 31<sup>st</sup> August, and his post was filled by Rev Mark Christmas. With no replacement in Nassau or Eleuthera we have thus found ourselves in this 'stretched' situation. This autumn we have begun a stewardship study, entitled "Treasures of the Transformed Life" to which some 106 of the membership has signed up. I am thrilled by this development, together with a series on 'Biblical Perspectives on Grieving', that I am leading, as it shows the need people have for deepening their faith and discipleship.

## **Tragic Family News**

We are all still in a state of numbness over a family tragedy that occurred in Rock Sound, Eleuthera. It was a terrible experience for Susan, the family, and also for the community of Eleuthera.

## **All Saints**

We continue to deepen the support and the ministry with the All Saints Community. It lives on a shoestring, and we are trying to pull together all supporters to help the community run more efficiently. I am amazed at the resilience and the positive outlook of the residents.

Jackie, for example became HIV positive, because of an unfaithful husband, and was then involved in an awful road accident. Whenever one visits, there is the most wonderful welcome, a mighty hug, and an acclamation of the goodness of God. Her Bible is a wonderful example of one that is well used – it is annotated, underlined, and worn. We often talk about something she has read – and the most amazing thing is that although she is confined to her 'hut' she is ever thinking of others. At times she will give me a couple of dollars to give to 'someone in need'!

Then there is Anthony & Stephanie, both HIV positive, who have a beautiful baby daughter, Anthonique, who is wonderful – fine and healthy. I hope to be conducting their wedding sometime before Christmas. A lawyer friend is helping sort out the marriage certificate arrangements. They have done a wonderful job on their humble home, and it is a delight to see the joy their daughter has brought to their lives.

Recently one of my favourite people, Karen, passed away at age 44. In her teenage years she had become hooked on drugs, and became HIV positive, and in her later years had AIDS. She would testify to her new found faith as giving her the hope she always needed in her life. She never seemed to be self-absorbed about her health, because as she would say; "I know Jesus loves me and he will look after me." Her faith gave her a peace that conquered all the adversity

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she had faced in life. I will always be grateful for her words of encouragement as well as her hugs.

Then Erica, a Haitian woman virtually crippled in a hit and run – no family in the Bahamas and speaks only Creole. I try speaking with my rudimentary French, and somehow we communicate. When I pray she holds my hand and one sees a peace descend over her oft-anguished face, and as we say 'Amen' she will sometimes take my hand and kiss it, and smile.

I often take visiting groups to All Saints – the 'other side of the Bahamas', and they often find it to be a very challenging experience. They will have seen the opulence of the Atlantis Resort and the multi-million dollar celebrity owned homes, and then they see the rustic simplicity and poverty of All Saints. They are amazed at the community spirit, and the human spirit of resilience despite the difficult and rudimentary environment. When we meet after the experience to 'un-pack' it, many talk about how they feel disbelief in what they see, and yet feel challenged as disciples of Jesus. We talk about mission and ministry. There is a desperate need for resources, but often we realize that mission is simply about being there, to be, as it were, together realizing the presence of Christ ministering to and being ministered by this community of God's children. There is a feeling of being humbled by the openness and welcome given to everyone by this community.

## **Other Projects**

I am very involved in the training and development of Local Preachers as well as the Local Presbyterate. In the MCCA I am involved in a working party which is developing new ways to assess and train Local Preachers. Both churches in Nassau are still developing their properties so much needed fund-raising continues.

The Adult Christian Education programme is continuing to develop really well throughout the District – having now completed the 32-34 week-long Disciple 1 and Christian Believer Courses, we are now concentrating on courses in the Short Term Disciple Series, and ones related to Christian Stewardship. The response is continuing to grow.

## **Society**

In Nassau these days it would seem to be quicker to walk than drive. Monday to Saturday, Nassau seems to be one big traffic jam. Throughout the day there are only a couple of 'windows' where the traffic is less. The island of New Providence is only 7 miles by 21 miles at it widest points, and some days I have spent over 3 hours of the day in traffic.

The murder rate is of huge concern, with most being committed in New Providence, followed by Grand Bahama. The police and the judicial system at present seem to be overwhelmed by this mayhem. There have been several forums to discuss the issues and share concerns, with the occasional pleas for the death penalty to be enforced. The prison is bursting at the seams and many persons including some of those waiting trial for murder, rape and other violent acts are actually out on bail until their case is heard.

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There are calls for more and better 'male role models' as well as seeking to encourage ways of resolving disputes peacefully. There is also an ongoing commentary from all sides on what has been labeled by the press and others as the 'gay agenda'. The Bahamas, and many of the Christian churches in particular, are generally very conservative on this issue, and it is disappointing to read some of the vitriolic rhetoric expressed by those whose views preach intolerance and who do not represent those with a more moderate, pastoral agenda.

## **Family**

1<sup>st</sup> August 2007 Susan and I celebrated our 20<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary. Can't believe it – we enjoyed a quiet few days with the boys on the island of Alderney, and on the day itself really splashed out as the four of us enjoyed a meal of fish and chips in a café by the sea - perfect.

Susan continues to teach Year 2 at St Andrews, and does very well with a very mixed ability class. Thomas is now in Year 10 and embarking on his GCSE courses. Jonathan is in the final stages of the IB course, with final exams in May 2008, and is researching an extended study on the spread of the Lionfish in Bahamas waters.

I do hope I can be more disciplined in sending news in the New Year, but for now we send you our thoughts and prayers and wish for you a hopeful and peaceful 2008 and beyond.

God bless,

*Eddie, Susan, Jonathan and Thomas*



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